# Do Languages Represent?: A Pilot Study on Linguistic Diversity and Library Staff

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## Introduction

As the medium for much of human communication, language is fundamental to social existence and is a subject of investigation in fields as varied as linguistics, education, neuroscience, and philosophy. In practice, it serves to inform, entertain, educate, and include or exclude people, shaping relationships and affecting power dynamics as it does so. As institutions that play host to both interactions and materials with linguistic content, libraries are highly linguistic spaces where language practices directly affect the fulfillment of information needs for the people they serve.

This paper focuses on multilingualism as a particular kind of language practice in libraries and argues for its active consideration in conversations about library service. The existence and usage of multiple languages are increasingly relevant to libraries given the rise of multilingual populations and globalizing processes in many regions, and the extent to which libraries accommodate multilingualism in their environments will affect how multilingual populations access and use library resources. The paper reviews the literature on multilingualism in libraries and suggests specifically linguistic conceptualizations of access and diversity as ways to unify this literature, describe the extent of library multilingualism, and encourage multilingual support. In particular, it explores the role of linguistically diverse staff as a means of mediating access to information and ends by describing a pilot study of linguistic diversity in public library staff. It reframes and strengthens discourses on language in libraries, provides some of the first data on library workers' language skills, and offers implications for professional calls towards access and diversity.

## Literature Review

Much of the literature on multilingualism in library and information studies (LIS) is characterized by an explicit or implicit focus on access in a given language. Access has been framed as a goal for multilingual activities as varied as chat reference (Cichanowicz & Chen, 2004), digital libraries (Vassilakaki & Garoufallou, 2013), information retrieval (Valentine, 2008; Nzomo, Ajiferuke, Vaughan, & McKenzie, 2016), reader's advisory (Hall-Ellis, 2008; Bolick, 2015), and collection development (Dilevko & Dali, 2002). However, while the notion of language as a barrier to access can be found in these articles, it is not engaged systematically, and multilingualism itself is not always the main focus. When mentioned, 'multilingual' has often been subordinated to other labels such as 'multicultural' (e.g. Smallwood & Becnel, 2013) and 'immigrant' (e.g. Cuban, 2007), which is useful in some contexts but may also allow the dynamics of language alone to go unanalyzed. In general, the literature focuses on practical responses to multilingualism in specific areas of library service. This narrow focus and these articles' isolation from each other are not far removed from the task-focused level of lists on communicating with patrons who have English as an additional language (e.g. Bordonaro, 2013; Carlyle, 2013).

Such divisions may reflect a grounding in what Andersen (2008) called the "technical and managerial discourse" (p. 100) dominant in LIS. Andersen described this discourse as proceeding from a material point of view that describes and quantifies phenomena, offering techniques and methods for overcoming problems but failing to connect them with wider contexts and questions of social, cultural, and political needs. For language issues, this disconnect means more time spent on descriptions and case studies of multilingual work and less on language ideologies or power structures in libraries generally. Indeed, many of the authors

cited above work mainly at the level of user satisfaction and meeting individual needs. This tendency towards an atomized, 'give them what they want' approach to multilingual services echoes the neoliberal ideologies that Buschman (2003, 2012) has explored at work in libraries. Even if libraries do exist only to meet patrons' expressed needs, users and non-users alike may still have difficulty expressing their wants and needs due to language barriers, and libraries may have difficulty communicating with them due to a lack of organizational capability. However, it is also the case that problems of language access are connected to wider structures of power, influence, and ideology that go unanalyzed in a neoliberal worldview but would benefit from being described and criticized. As such, practical descriptions and actions such as those above should be complemented by and grounded in broader considerations of multilingualism in libraries. Without such considerations, the effects of systemic phenomena such as English-only ideologies and linguistic discrimination (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson, & Rannut, 1995; Lippi-Green, 2012; Wiley, 2014) will remain unnamed and unobserved in LIS.

One way for LIS to unite works on linguistic access both to each other and to broader ideologies and contexts is through the concept of linguistic diversity. Piller (2016) has approached a definition of linguistic diversity first as "linguistic difference that becomes socially relevant" (p. 11) and again as referring to "[t]he unique ways in which each and every one of us uses the linguistic resources at our disposal to communicate in context" (p. 12). In doing so, Piller has avoided a simplified view of diversity as merely encompassing different languages, which often have fuzzy or arbitrary boundaries, and allows for diversity within language groups as well as between languages. For instance, the Midlands dialect of North American English and African-American Vernacular English are both varieties of English, but one is considerably more privileged than the other. Linguistic diversity is therefore relevant to library access because

accessing information in a given language requires skills in that language to be present at some point in the information-seeking process. When different languages or ways of using language exist, access should take into account the diversity of the languages present in the environment. For libraries, this work may be framed as representing and reflecting the languages present in a library's service area. It is evident that barriers to access may arise where there is an absence of linguistic representation: a patron who speaks Spanish as a first language may encounter more difficulty finding a Spanish-language DVD or even knowing it exists if mediating entities such as staff, signage, or the catalog lack Spanish-language capabilities.

However, despite the presence of multiple languages and language practices in society, language is not generally foregrounded as a category of difference producing diversity to the same extent as concepts such as race, gender, and nationality. Explicitly considering the relevance of linguistic difference is valuable given its relations to power dynamics and access whenever language is used, yet "there is currently a distinct absence of any public discussion of what the fact of linguistic diversity might actually mean for our social organization." (Piller, 2016, p. 2)

Indeed, works in LIS that explicitly link language with diversity are few and far between. Cooper (2008) framed linguistic diversity as a key part of cultural heritage and describes various projects being undertaken to cultivate it in Queensland, Australia. Reznowski (2009) proscribed roles for libraries as "active partners in the struggle to protect and foster linguistic diversity" (p. 164) and made a case for situating libraries in opposition to English-only ideologies in the United States. Paganelli and Houston (2013) and Ly (2018) investigated the numerical diversity of specific multilingual collections relative to the potential numbers of language users and concluded that the given collections indeed underrepresented such users' languages. In all these

cases, linguistic diversity was seen as intertwined with access to goods and services, especially collections.

Recommendations from library professional organizations have also related multilingualism to access and diversity. Principles of equal access, such as those expressed by the American Library Association (2004), suggest that if the library provides a service in English, it should strive to provide it in any other languages significantly present among its service population. The ALA's Reference and User Service Association (2007) supported efforts to serve patrons in their preferred languages and calls for multilingualism to be an integral part of library service. Though steeped more in the language of assessment and efficiency than in contexts of social interaction and diversity, its guidelines did call for a systematic investigation of language issues in libraries and cover a variety of library offerings. The IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (IFLA & UNESCO, 2012) complemented the ALA by framing its calls for use and access within the context of cultural and linguistic diversity. It stated that "services in a culturally and linguistically diverse context include both the provision of services to all types of library users and the provision of library services specifically targeted to underserved cultural and linguistic groups" (p. 2). Thus, supporting multilingualism where it exists becomes an essential part of ensuring equal access.

However, the extent of these calls' impact is unclear. The prevalence of articles, conference sessions, and discussions on diversity may be taken as an encouraging sign, except that language is not often mentioned in such cases. It seems that discussions of language and of diversity have largely occurred in separate, mutually exclusive contexts: discussions of diversity in the LIS literature have rarely included language in their purview, and discussions of language have rarely been situated in terms of diversity.

Considering these two concepts together would be helpful for two main reasons: If multilingual public services and activities aimed at building organizational capabilities can be brought together under the umbrella of linguistic access and situated in relation to linguistic diversity as a value, then libraries can better frame these separate services as part of larger efforts and justify allocating resources towards these services. Also, recognizing and representing diversity where it exists and reducing barriers to access are worthwhile actions in their own right.

One component that is absent from most discussions of linguistic access and diversity is the role of staff and staff language skills. To be sure, not all means of supporting access and diversity absolutely require staff proficiency in another language. Many libraries do excellent work in providing access through other multilingual resources such as collections, websites, signage, and cataloging. However, while this kind of infrastructure is important, staff are still necessary for it to exist in the first place. Staff also support linguistic access through more than merely technological means: access is partly determined by social interactions, and language is integral to services such as reference, instruction, readers' advisory, and storytimes. Because the human interaction and mediation provided by library staff remains a fundamental part of library service, the importance of staff cannot be understated. If staff are a library's greatest resource, they should be so for all patrons, not just those fluent in a dominant language.

Even so, the LIS literature only sometimes foregrounds staff as part of providing linguistic access, and it rarely does so in terms of linguistic diversity. Professional library organizations have mentioned staff language skills: ALA's guidelines on multilingual collections and service (2007) stated that "staff working with patrons who have limited English abilities should be multilingual in order to provide effective service," and IFLA and UNESCO (2012) said that "staff of a multicultural library should reflect the cultural and linguistic characteristics

of the community." However, whether these calls have caused increases in multilingual staff is unknown. While Cooper (2008), Reznowski (2009), and Ly (2018) have described techniques for increasing linguistic diversity, those techniques did not explicitly articulate the role of staff in that work, which was instead framed as occurring through the library's physical and virtual collections. This focus on collections as central to multilingual support continued even where staff were mentioned. Dilevko and Dali (2002) named a lack of staff language proficiency as one obstacle to multilingual collection development for many Canadian libraries. Though they mentioned training library staff in language skills and incorporating multilingual issues into LIS education, these were just two of many suggestions delivered with the end goal of supporting multilingual collections. Thus, their emphasis was primarily on collections with staffing as one impact factor, not on staff in and of themselves. However, they did call for "a commitment to view every aspect of library work through the prism of multilingualism" (p. 131), which may be taken to include the role of staff. Cichanowicz and Chen's (2004) discussion of multilingual chat reference is notable for framing staff language skills as a diversity issue, but it touched on the topic only briefly. Ultimately, the sole study found that addressed and explored library staff language proficiencies was Hall-Ellis's (2007) survey of workers in technical services. Even then, it viewed language only in terms of its functional utility for cataloging tasks, not in relation to populations served.

The current treatment of multilingualism in the LIS literature leaves many topics unexplored. The scarcity of LIS literature combining language with topics of diversity and representation suggests that linguistic diversity is either not a problem or not viewed as a problem, but it is unclear which is the case. At the same time, anecdotal evidence and the prevalence of case studies on multilingual service suggest that many individual libraries make

efforts to serve multilingual patrons in some way. It also remains to be seen whether libraries answer calls for multilingual support and how professed values align with expressed values when it comes to language. Finally, the extent to which linguistic representation exists in library staff is largely unknown. Comparisons have shown that librarians are not as diverse as the general population or even other library workers when viewed in terms of race and gender (Lance, 2005; ALA, 2012; Bourg, 2014), but it is unknown whether they are similarly unrepresentative in terms of language.

To start generating lines of inquiry focused on these issues, a pilot study was conducted to explore the following questions:

- Does the linguistic diversity of library workers reflect that of the library's service population?
- How do credentialed librarians compare with uncredentialed library workers in terms of linguistic diversity?

This focus on staffing was chosen given its potential importance in supporting multilingual access and the lack of data on staff linguistic diversity. The study dealt with library staff as a whole and not just credentialed librarians because members of the public may interact with any library worker and may not distinguish between a shelver and a reference librarian. The first question was intended to explore the idea of linguistic representation by looking at diversity not for its own sake, but as it compared with the populations served. The second question was aimed at seeing whether the tendency towards reduced diversity among MLIS-holding librarians also held true when it comes to language.

## Methodology

A pilot study was conducted to assess the linguistic diversity of public library staff as measured by the incidence and relative proportions of non-English language proficiencies. Such a study was intended to gather preliminary data and determine what aspects of staff linguistic diversity might deserve further investigation.

The survey instrument was constructed using the UBC FluidSurveys system. The survey began with a page describing the study and terms of consent. If consent was obtained, the study went on to ask if respondents knew any languages besides English. For those who did, the survey provided respondents with the option to list each additional language in a free text field and answer questions about the nature and frequency of use on the job, as well as overall competency in that language. All respondents answered questions about educational level (including the possession of a Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) or equivalent), job title, and extent of interaction with the public. Finally, the survey concluded with a space for respondents to share comments and provide a measure of qualitative data.

Three US public library systems were surveyed to allow for comparison both among and within organizational settings. Public libraries were selected because of their geographically-defined service areas, which would allow for easy comparisons with external data, and because their particular commitments to service and access mean that they strive to serve everyone in those service areas, including multilingual users. The library systems were identified based on the following criteria: they mapped to US Census regions, had significant non-English-speaking populations in their service area, were large enough that individuals could reasonably expect not to be identified by their responses, and were not known to the author in terms of multilingual services.

Five library systems meeting the criteria described above were selected to participate in the study, and their directors received invitations to the study via email. If the directors agreed to have their library system participate in the study, they were then asked to distribute the survey to their staff. Three systems agreed to participate in the study. These systems were all urban library systems in the US Pacific Northwest with multiple branch locations. System 1 had a service population of about 80,000, System 2 served around 110,000 people, and System 3 had approximately 210,000 living in its service area. Data on language knowledge was compared with results from the 2015 estimates for the American Community Survey, an ongoing survey conducted by the US Census Bureau. These results measure languages spoken with specific reference to English and Spanish, and they map directly to the service areas of the chosen libraries.

Due to the nature of the study, it had several expected limitations: the survey relied on self-reporting; there was no mechanism to ensure full participation by the desired sample groups; the results were not generalizable; and service area population may not correspond to the actual people served, which may include non-residents, travelers, and tourists. However, these shortcomings were deemed acceptable given the goal of generating multiple lines of inquiry.

## Results

The surveys took place in March and April of 2017 over two-week periods for Systems 1 and 2 and over six days for System 3. System 3 had a shortened response period to avoid conflict with an internal staff survey and because responses for the other surveys had trailed off after the first several days. A total of 124 responses were received: 24 from System 1, 39 from System 2, and 61 from System 3. Eight responses from Systems 1 and 2 were discarded due to a survey construction error that let participants move past the consent page while responding ‘No’ to the

consent form. This error was noticed and addressed in time for System 3 to take the survey. A further 11 responses were discarded due to being incomplete beyond the first question, leaving 105 usable responses. The number of responses was compared with staffing numbers provided by each library system to determine the response rates for the system, shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Usable Responses, Total Paid Staff, and Response Rates by Library System*

| | System | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | Total |
| *n* usable responses | 19 | 29 | 57 | 105 |
| *n* total paid staff | 75 | 67 | 131 | 273 |
| response rate | 25.3% | 43.3% | 43.5% | 38.5% |

The demographic data collected in the survey (Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5) helped to characterize the population. Respondents had various educational levels and job titles. A plurality of all respondents held an MLIS or equivalent and identified as librarians, but other educational levels and job titles were represented too. Example responses to the ‘Other’ field for educational level included “some college,” “Current grad school,” and “equivalent to an Associate's degree.” Examples of ‘Other’ job titles included “Circulation manager,” “Branch Manager,” “Assistant Director,” and “Library custodian.” The majority of respondents (80.0%) reported interacting with the public daily, and an additional 11.4% reported doing so two to three times per week.

Table 2

*Respondents by Highest Educational Level Attained*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| High school diploma or GED | 15.8% | 3 | 10.3% | 3 | 14.0% | 8 | 13.3% | 14 |
| Associate's degree | 5.3% | 1 | 6.9% | 2 | 15.8% | 9 | 11.4% | 12 |
| Bachelor's degree | 26.3% | 5 | 27.6% | 8 | 28.1% | 16 | 27.6% | 29 |
| Master's degree [a] | 42.1% | 8 | 48.3% | 14 | 28.1% | 16 | 35.9% | 38 |
| MLIS or equivalent | 36.8% | 7 | 44.8% | 13 | 26.3% | 15 | 33.3% | 35 |
| Other Master's | 5.3% | 1 | 10.3% | 3 | 5.3% | 3 | 6.6% | 7 |
| Doctoral degree | - | 0 | 3.5% | 1 | - | 0 | 1.0% | 1 |
| Other | 10.5% | 2 | 3.5% | 1 | 14.0% | 8 | 10.4% | 11 |

*Note.* [a] Percentages for Master's degrees may not add up to the overall percentage due to respondents holding more than one Master's degree.

Table 3

*Respondents by Job Title*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| Library Shelver/Page | 5.3% | 1 | 17.2% | 5 | 17.5% | 10 | 15.2% | 16 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Library Clerk | 21.1% | 4 | - | 0 | 21.1% | 12 | 15.2% | 16 |
| Library Assistant | 5.3% | 1 | 3.5% | 1 | 12.3% | 7 | 8.6% | 9 |
| Library Technician | 5.3% | 1 | 27.6% | 8 | - | 0 | 8.6% | 9 |
| Librarian | 26.3% | 5 | 31.0% | 9 | 24.6% | 14 | 26.7% | 28 |
| Other | 24.1% | 7 | 20.7% | 6 | 24.6% | 14 | 25.7% | 27 |

Table 4

*Respondents by Frequency of Interaction with the Public*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| Daily | 73.7% | 14 | 79.3% | 23 | 82.5% | 47 | 80.0% | 84 |
| 2-3 times a week | 21.1% | 4 | 10.3% | 3 | 8.8% | 5 | 11.4% | 12 |
| Weekly | 5.3% | 1 | - | 0 | 1.8% | 1 | 1.9% | 2 |
| 2-3 times a month | - | 0 | - | 0 | 3.5% | 2 | 1.9% | 2 |
| Monthly | - | 0 | 3.5% | 1 | 1.8% | 1 | 1.9% | 2 |
| Less than once a month | - | 0 | 6.9% | 2 | 1.8% | 1 | 2.8% | 3 |

As seen in Table 5, language knowledge and use were largely associated with the Indo-European language family, with some East Asian languages present too. Spanish was the most widely known and used language, with 23.8% of respondents reporting knowledge of it and 4.8% reporting use on the job.

Table 5

*Specific Languages by Reported Knowledge and Use*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | *n* knowing | *n* using | *n* knowing | *n* using | *n* knowing | n using | *n* knowing | *n* using |
| Spanish | 5 | 1 | 10 | 4 | 10 | 0 | 25 | 5 |
| French | 1 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 11 | 0 |
| German | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 1 | 11 | 1 |
| Japanese | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 1 |
| ASL | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| Italian | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Latin | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Hmong | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Punjabi | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Flemish | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Portuguese | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |

One focus of this survey was comparison between staff language skills and language skills in the general service area population. An immediately apparent gap was that between knowledge of a language and its actual use on the job, as seen in Table 6. The proportions of staff knowing only English was much lower than the ACS general population estimates of 87.0%, 75.7%, and 90.9%, respectively, for an average proportion of 86.1%. However, the rates

of English-only language use on the job were higher than the ACS estimates across all three systems. The incidence of language use by participants on the job was low overall, with eight respondents out of 105 saying that they used any language besides English in the course of their job duties.

Table 6

*Incidence and Use of Languages in Staff*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| staff knowing English only | 68.4% | 13 | 55.2% | 16 | 57.9% | 33 | 59.1% | 62 |
| staff knowing more than one language | 31.6% | 6 | 44.8% | 13 | 42.1% | 24 | 41.0% | 43 |
| *n* = +1 language | 26.3% | 5 | 24.1% | 7 | 24.6% | 14 | 24.8% | 26 |
| *n* = +2 languages | 0.0% | 0 | 17.2% | 5 | 12.3% | 7 | 11.4% | 12 |
| *n* = +3 languages | 5.3% | 1 | 3.5% | 1 | 5.3% | 3 | 4.8% | 5 |
| staff using only English on the job | 94.7% | 16 | 86.2% | 25 | 94.7% | 54 | 92.4% | 97 |
| staff using more than one language on the job | 5.3% | 1 | 13.8% | 4 | 5.3% | 3 | 7.6% | 8 |

A related part of this question was whether the linguistic diversity of staff also reflected the languages present in the service population. Determining exact correspondence was not fully possible as the ACS does not parse most languages into specific categories, but Table 7 shows

the comparisons for Spanish, the only language besides English specified in the ACS results. Stated knowledge of Spanish exceeded the ACS general population estimates of 5.0%, 10.2%, and 2.2%, respectively, for an average of 4.9% overall. The rates of library staff's use of Spanish on the job closely matched these proportions both overall and for System 1 and exceeded them somewhat for System 2. Respondents from System 3 did not report any Spanish use on the job.

Table 7

*Incidence and Use of Spanish in Staff*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| staff knowing Spanish | 26.3% | 5 | 34.5% | 10 | 17.5% | 10 | 23.8% | 25 |
| staff using Spanish on the job | 5.3% | 1 | 13.8% | 4 | 0.0% | 0 | 4.8% | 5 |

The nature of non-English language use was further qualified by data on the frequency and fluency of that usage. Due to an oversight in survey construction, limited data was collected on these topics. As the survey was designed, it only showed the questions on frequency and fluency for a given language if respondents answered 'yes' to the question on whether they used that language on the job. Even so, the existing data suggests low frequency and fluency of use.

Table 8 shows that most languages used were used less than once a month, and only two non-English languages were used more than once a week. Table 9 shows that language fluency was most often present at a basic level.

Table 8

*Non-English Languages Used on the Job by Frequency of Use*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| Daily | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 |
| 2-3 times a week | 50.0% | 1 | 20.0% | 1 | - | 0 | 20.0% | 2 |
| Weekly | - | 0 | 20.0% | 1 | - | 0 | 10.0% | 1 |
| 2-3 times a month | - | 0 | 20.0% | 1 | - | 0 | 10.0% | 1 |
| Monthly | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 |
| Less than once a month | 50.0% | 1 | 40.0% | 2 | 100.0% | 3 | 60.0% | 6 |

Table 9

*Non-English Languages Used on the Job by Fluency Assessment*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| I can greet people or ask simple questions. | 50.0% | 1 | 60.0% | 3 | - | 0 | 40.0% | 4 |
| I can ask most basic questions and understand the answer. I can talk about things like my family and my interests. | 50.0% | 1 | 40.0% | 2 | - | 0 | 30.0% | 3 |
| I can form some complex sentences and I | - | 0 | - | 0 | 33.3% | 1 | 10.0% | 1 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| understand more than half of what is said. Others understand me most of the time, but sometimes I have to repeat myself. | - | 0 | - | 0 | 33.3% | 1 | 10.0% | 1 |
| I can form complex expressions. I am comfortable discussing most topics and conversation flows easily. | - | 0 | - | 0 | 33.3% | 1 | 10.0% | 1 |
| I am a fluent speaker. I understand everything that is said to me. | - | 0 | - | 0 | 33.3% | 1 | 10.0% | 1 |

The other major area this study explored was differences in language proficiency between staff with and without MLIS degrees or equivalents. As Table 10 shows, the proportions of MLIS holders varied somewhat between systems, though they averaged out to a 1:2 ratio.

Table 10

*Staff by Presence of an MLIS or Equivalent Degree*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| staff with MLIS or equivalent | 36.8% | 7 | 44.8% | 13 | 26.3% | 15 | 33.3% | 35 |
| staff with other education | 63.2% | 12 | 55.2% | 16 | 73.7% | 42 | 66.6% | 70 |

Tables 11 and 12 show the differences in language knowledge and use between MLIS holders and those with other education. Although a higher proportion of MLIS holders reported knowing multiple languages in every system, a greater proportion of staff with other education reported actually using non-English languages on the job in two of the three systems.

Table 11

*Language Incidence and Use on the Job for Staff with an MLIS or Equivalent Degree*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| MLIS holders, knowing English only | 57.1% | 4 | 46.1% | 6 | 40.0% | 6 | 45.7% | 16 |
| MLIS holders, knowing other language(s) | 42.9% | 3 | 53.9% | 7 | 60.0% | 9 | 54.3% | 19 |
| MLIS holders, using other language(s) on the job | 14.3% | 1 | 7.7% | 1 | - | 0 | 5.7% | 2 |

Table 12

*Language Incidence and Use on the Job for Staff with Other Education*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| other education, knowing English only | 75.0% | 9 | 62.5% | 10 | 64.3% | 27 | 65.7% | 46 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| other education, knowing other language(s) | 25.0% | 3 | 38.5% | 6 | 35.7% | 15 | 34.3% | 24 |
| other education, using other language(s) on the job | 0.0% | 0 | 18.8% | 3 | 7.1% | 3 | 8.6% | 6 |

Overall, 25.0% of those who did not have MLIS degrees and knew another language used it on the job, compared with 10.5% of those with MLIS degrees. This disparity does not appear to be due to the frequency of public interaction, which remained similar between the two groups as shown in Tables 13 and 14. 80.0% of both groups interacted with the public on a daily basis.

Table 13

*Frequency of Interaction with the Public for Staff with an MLIS or Equivalent*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| Daily | 71.4% | 5 | 77.0% | 10 | 86.7% | 13 | 80.0% | 28 |
| 2-3 times a week | 14.3% | 1 | 7.7% | 1 | 6.7% | 1 | 8.6% | 3 |
| Weekly | 14.3% | 1 | - | 0 | 6.7% | 1 | 5.7% | 2 |
| 2-3 times a month | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 |
| Monthly | - | 0 | 7.7% | 1 | - | 0 | 2.9% | 1 |
| Less than once a month | - | 0 | 7.7% | 1 | - | 0 | 2.9% | 1 |

Table 14

*Frequency of Interaction with the Public for Staff with Other Education*

| | System | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | Total | |
| | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* |
| Daily | 75.0% | 9 | 81.3% | 13 | 81.0% | 34 | 80.0% | 56 |
| 2-3 times a week | 25.0% | 3 | 12.5% | 2 | 9.5% | 4 | 12.9% | 9 |
| Weekly | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 | - | 0 |
| 2-3 times a month | - | 0 | - | 0 | 4.8% | 2 | 2.9% | 2 |
| Monthly | - | 0 | - | 0 | 2.4% | 1 | 1.4% | 1 |
| Less than once a month | - | 0 | 6.2% | 1 | 2.4% | 1 | 2.9% | 2 |

## Discussion

Despite the exploratory nature of the survey, some interesting patterns emerged from the data that will merit further investigation. Both the quantitative results and the qualitative additions highlighted differences between speaking, knowing, and fluency, offering both room to refine the survey instrument and fruitful contrasts for further inquiry.

Answers to the first question, whether the linguistic diversity of library workers reflects that of the library's service population, were complicated by questions of how to assess that diversity and its variance between groups. For instance, the survey instrument asked about 'knowing' a language to acknowledge and include respondents who had reading or writing ability but did not necessarily speak or listen to a given language. Meanwhile, the source of

linguistic data on the general population, the American Community Survey, asked only about speaking languages, not knowing them.

The results also showed that knowing a language did not equate to fluency in that language or to use on the job. While library staff's language knowledge appeared to be more diverse than the general populations, the number of people who actually used a non-English language on the job was low, as was the frequency of that language use. The survey omission described above, which only showed the questions on frequency and fluency to some participants, prevented comparison with the fluency levels of people who do not use their languages on the job, which would have been helpful to see if low fluency was the norm or suggested itself as a reason for this lack of use. However, the limited data, along with qualitative additions, still suggested that overall fluency was low: Several respondents qualified their stated languages with words like 'passable,' 'limited,' or 'basic' in the open text fields asking about languages known. Qualitative responses in the space for comments at the end further reinforced the idea that knowing a few phrases or words is not the same as knowing a language. Given these results, it appears that library staff in these settings may be less diverse in the sense of being less likely to fluently speak a language besides English.

Answers to the second question, which was about how credentialed librarians compare with uncredentialed library workers, showed that MLIS holders were more likely to know another language, though the qualifications regarding fluency and use still held true. Another tendency suggested by the data was that individual non-credentialed staff may be more likely to use their languages when present, despite having less linguistic proficiency as a group compared to MLIS holders.

While the survey was intended to take different types of knowledge, levels of use, and levels of fluency into account, the responses made it clear that there was more to language knowledge and linguistic diversity than the survey allowed for. The gaps between knowledge, use, and fluency suggest that merely counting the presence of languages is not enough for a full picture of diversity. While such quantification may suffice when viewing language in a strictly functional sense, as with Hall-Ellis (2007), describing language in terms of diversity must also encompass other dimensions such as use and fluency.

Finally, the qualitative responses indicated that library staff recognized both the importance of multilingual abilities and their existence in public libraries. Some respondents indicated that they had purposefully pursued additional language training for work, while others shared that even limited proficiency in a non-English language made them a go-to person when other staff needed access to that language.

If fluent speakers are not present in libraries in the same proportions as the service population, and if people do not use languages besides English in the library as much as in other domains, then many questions remain. What factors prevent language knowledge from resulting in language use? What circumstances motivate and enable staff and patrons to use their language skills? How does language use correlate with fluency or with factors that may depend upon the patron as much as the staff member? Questions such as these can inform research agendas going forward as well as concrete actions that libraries can take to increase linguistic diversity. Subsequent research directions may therefore include expanding the range of quantitative data available, not just on language skills, but on multilingual collections, metadata, and other means of access. This data could also be complemented by more qualitative input on both staff and patrons' attitudes towards the extent of library multilingualism.

While this study's focus was narrow, it was also grounded in broader considerations of multilingualism, and its results successfully pointed back to them. Similarly, the examination of individual instances and functions of language use can benefit from addressing systematic and contextual complexities. Language intersects with race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and other overlapping categories that affect power dynamics, and so future research could address these intersections too. The LIS literature can also develop and adapt grounded and theoretical approaches towards language in libraries and incorporate theory and models from other fields to inform practice. Authors in areas where language is an explicit concern, such as applied linguistics and language education, have already created practically-oriented models and frameworks that open up additional categories of analysis (e.g. Darvin & Norton, 2015; Douglas Fir Group, 2016) and can readily be applied to library service. There is also a significant existing focus on linguistic diversity in the literature on education and literacy (e.g. Commins & Miramontes, 2005; Bustos Flores & Smith, 2009; Haddix, 2016) that can be productively mapped to library contexts.

Outside of the research world, library educators and managers can take steps towards hiring, educating, and training for linguistic diversity and access. LIS programs could recruit for multilingual students and faculty, and coursework on topics such as cataloging, service, and design could include more resources on multilingualism. Explicitly considering language in library hiring practices will be more likely to attract qualified staff (Winston & Walstad, 2006) and will help to create libraries that reflect the linguistic abilities of their service populations. Libraries can also build linguistic diversity with existing staff. Although it requires effort and investment, the fact that languages can be learned makes it possible to transcend language barriers. Even if language learning is not a possibility for staff, there could still be workshops on

how to communicate across language barriers and provision of passive tools such as brochures and signage. There could also be linguistic inventories conducted both at the professional level, through projects such as the ALA's Diversity Counts initiative, and at community levels, as individual libraries compare the linguistic skills and experiences of their staff with those of their service populations. Finally, professional organizations could join with IFLA and UNESCO (2012) in calling for linguistic diversity among library staff to reflect that of the library's service population in order to promote full and equal access.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to tie language in libraries to wider themes of access and diversity while also engaging in practical inquiry to increase understanding of how those themes play out in context. The intent here is not to minimize the importance of other kinds of diversity and access but to add language and staffing into the mix as additional factors that deserve consideration. Libraries can support multilingualism to the extent that it is present in their service populations by viewing and enacting their values through a linguistic lens. Such a conscious and systematic consideration of language as a factor in access to library service will support proactive rather than reactive responses to linguistic issues faced by library users, non-users, and staff. It will help libraries strengthen existing capabilities and provide a starting point for them to consider if and how they should change further. Ultimately, it will result in better access for all, regardless of language.

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